

Oh, what will it take for some of us to wake up? What type of challenges do we need? As John F. Kennedy said, those of us who make non-violent revolution impossible cause violent revolution to be inevitable. Revolution will come in this country. The disinherited, the dispossessed, the poor, the weak, are crying out for justice; they will not be denied. When I think of this, I think of St. Francis of Assissi.



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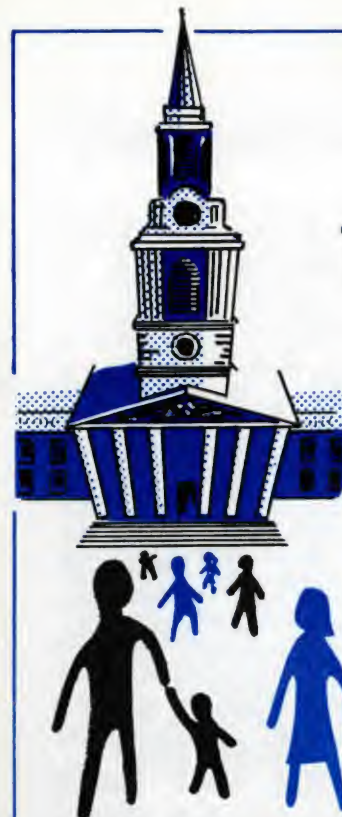
THE FEAR WITHOUT HOPE

A Sermon By

Reverend David H. Eaton

ALL SOULS CHURCH
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, my Lord and my Redeemer, always. Amen.

Hatred, love, injury, pardon, doubt, faith. I met Gerivanni when I was in junior high school. Our teacher was taking us on the usual rounds through the library -- a sort of get-acquainted-with-your-library orientation. All of us have been through it. At some point I remember seeing a book cover: a picture of a man sitting on a rock. At first I thought either he had lost his mind or I was losing my mind. He seemed to be talking to animals -- deer, birds, a fox, rabbits, and squirrels. That picture stayed in my mind all day, and the next day I came back and checked the book out, and that was my first meeting with Francis of Assissi.

For years, now, when I have heard people say "we don't want to hear about conflict when we go to church, we want to hear about spiritual things,"

I have thought about Francis of Assissi, this flower of beauty, and how he first rejected the social order of his day and later disinherited himself from his domineering father. When I hear people say political discussion should be kept out of the Church, I have many responses. But before I respond in some moral, ethical, or theological way, I think of Francis of Assissi; how this son of a cloth merchant, comfortably middle class, spent one year as a prisoner of war because he led the people of Assissi in a revolt against the nobles. When I hear these statements and these concerns, I smile, because through my mind's eye I see this man of most humble spirit speaking to the inmates in prison and to the prison guards as if all of them were truly his brothers. I smile when I hear these opinions, and feel the anxiety as people state them for I know the people who make these statements are genuinely concerned with the dynamics of their questions.

My inner smile is triggered not by humor nor by sympathy. My inner smile is the result of the empathy created by not being able adequately to share my thoughts and my experiences: not being able somehow to pull a switch and let the questioner know and feel that reality is not broken up into various parts and given labels, but that the men and women of true spirit and true humanity have been those who have never feared confrontation, those who have never feared to look an issue squarely in the eye, those who have never feared being involved with reality. And I think of Francis of Assissi.

In the life of this man whom I first encountered in junior high school, I was better

able to understand what Reinhold Niebuhr talked about in his book The Responsible Being. I was better able to see that man, from the very moment he begins to exist, exists not in a vacuum; the being of man itself is determined by how he reacts to situations in which he finds himself.

At this moment, in some maternity room, an expectant mother is on the table going through the anguish and pain of childbirth. The doctor waits at the warm pouch and assists the baby through. The shock of birth for the child is so great that he gasps for his first breath. If the child has difficulty with his first breath, the doctor smacks him on the buttocks. While crying he gets his lungs full of life-giving air.

Forces outside of ourselves are the determining factors in our first breath.

The man who fears life, who fears to meet issues square on, has fear where there is no hope. A few days ago in one of the chambers of the House of Representatives I was reminded of a statement made by President John F. Kennedy and, interestingly enough, the man who reminded me of the statement was himself quite like St. Francis of Assissi. I've known him many, many years and he is a humble, modest, intelligent man, with a small frame and a quiet voice that often reaches a shrill pitch when he is excited: my good friend Reverend Walter Fauntroy. As I listened to his testimony I was reminded of a statement by President Kennedy, "The forces that make nonviolent revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable."

In those House chambers were the young of all ages. The young of spirit were attempting to recruit men of power and influence to their ranks. Young boys and young girls -- the young of spirit, in their sixties and in their fifties and seventies -- came before the illustrious body comprised of at least fourteen members of the House of Representatives, plus four United States Senators, including the Senate Majority Whip, (the Senators were there as guests). One after another we testified concerning national priorities and military spending -- the presentations, questions, answers, and discussions concerned both national and local priorities. I would like to share with you a few of the facts and figures relevant to the hearings.

As of October 24, 1969, the United States had spent in one year six billion dollars for 6,000 aircraft. What could this amount of money mean for the civilian population? We could fully equip 1,300 junior high schools that could each handle 1,000 students; we could fully equip senior high schools for 1,500 students in 250 communities; we could pay a starting salary of \$7,000 for teachers for all of these schools -- one teacher for every 27 children -- and that would total 35,714 teachers. Those cost figures are based on District of Columbia public school salary scales.

The testimony was impressive, given with compassion, without hate and, in fact, pleadingly. At the end of the testimony the chairman made the following statement, and I quote him in essence: "This has been the most informative testimony we have had con-

cerning national and local priorities, especially local priorities. We who serve on the House District Committee are beginning to wonder why we have not met you people before. We wonder who has been keeping us apart." At that point there was an affirmative nod from many of the Congressmen. The chairman continued, "The regrettable part of today's hearing is that, to the best of my knowledge, all of us here agree that the national and local priorities need radical and fundamental changes. Our colleagues who really need to be here today are not present." (Only a few from the House District Committee were present. The chairman of the House District Committee was conspicuously absent.)

What is the fear that has no hope? What is it about man that prevents his values from coming to adjustment with human and humane priorities? Those who were present did not fear confrontation. The ones who were not there feared the type of change that might take place. What one really fears is not the act of confrontation, but change. What is feared by many in this church, in this community, in this city, and in this world, is that confrontation will cause change.

One fears that the part of him which is comfortable may become uncomfortable; one fears that the satisfied part of him may become dissatisfied; one fears that the secure may become less secure. The only way that this fear can be eradicated is to force oneself into confrontation. In fear and trembling, deal with the issue head-on. Admit, "I'm scared as hell," while meeting the issue square on.

Change is not always pleasant, yet for

vitality in life change is always necessary. Vitality in life means change. Not all change sustains life, not all change aids vitality, but the refusal to begin the process of change, which in the first instance is the ability to confront, is certain death.

I wish all of us could know Francis of Assissi, a man who really had all of the privileges of his day. He was indeed secure in the twelfth century. His parents had money, his father had station and position, and he had a bright future. But can you not see the similarities between many of our young people in the colleges and high schools and junior high schools today and St. Francis of Assissi? I have faith in this nation for one basic reason: because I know the child is really the father of the man. And the fact that our young people are from materially secure backgrounds enables these young men and women not to fear and not to be insecure.

One of the interesting points about the most secure people of our time is that most of them were not born in poverty. Poverty is not good soil for the growing of a secure individual. Those of us who have known the pangs of hunger, those who have known fear, when we do attain secure positions, often -- though not always -- become the conservatives with values that we want to promulgate because we fear return to our former condition. I know a person who must have his refrigerator always filled, because if he opens the door of the refrigerator and food is not there, he becomes anxious. Even though the food may spoil in the refrigerator, that's allright. Let the food spoil; that's better than anxiety.

In this church I know that there are men and

women who fear even the thought of having to relate to those close to us in a new and different manner. But I also know that there are many of us who welcome this glorious opportunity because the changes that have to be made will keep us and this church vital and necessary and essential and alive.

To those we think do not understand the nature of change, let us not be harsh. Let us share, not so much by words as by precept and example, what real living can mean as a redemptive and reconciling force. The resources of this church must be used wisely. As many of us as possible must participate in the decision-making process -- confrontation. We must set up mechanisms by which we know the issues; we must make choices and decisions based upon facts, not mythology. We may have to dig deeper in our pockets so we will be sure not to equivocate. If this is what it takes to live and grow and be vital in this world, this is what we will do.

I wish we had known St. Francis of Assissi, and then the fear of confrontation might vanish for some of us and we would once again have hope. We could say with him in a new way, and mean it: Make me an instrument of thy peace; where there is hatred we will sow love; where there is injury, we will pardon; where there is doubt in the minds of a few, by our actions we will bring about faith; where there is despair, whether in a person or in a community, we will build hope; where there is darkness and depression, we will bring light and realistic expectation; where there is sadness, we will work and bring joy. And as we do this, we will then understand that by giving, we are the recipients.